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# Georgia in His Mind: A Cognitive Explanation for George W. Bush's Decision-Making in the 2008 August War

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# **GEORGIA IN HIS MIND: A COGNITIVE EXPLANATION FOR GEORGE W. BUSH'S DECISION-MAKING IN THE 2008 AUGUST WAR**

**Lisel Hintz, Cornell University**

## **Abstract**

This paper explores the case of US President George W. Bush's unwavering support for the Republic of Georgia in its aggressive engagement with Russia during the 2008 August War, a nearly universally acknowledged judgment error that puzzled Bush's own team as much as it did foreign policy analysts. Finding explanations grounded in alliance behavior, audience costs, and resource security inadequate, the paper offers a cognitive heuristics account that focuses on the fundamental attribution error (FAE). Examining how the FAE can function in terms of assessing the actions of perceived friends reveals Bush's failure to update his beliefs about the increasingly erratic behavior of Georgian President and Bush confidante Mikhail Saakashvili. In presenting an explanation for this empirical puzzle, the paper contributes a new perspective on the FAE of use in the burgeoning literature employing psychological approaches to foreign policy outcomes.

## **About the Author**

Lisel Hintz is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Einaudi Center for International Studies at Cornell University for AY 2015-16. She received her Ph.D. in Political Science from George Washington University, and will be a Visiting Assistant Professor at Barnard College for AY 2016-17. Bridging the subfields of International Relations and Comparative Politics, her research investigates how contestation over various forms of identity (e.g. ethnic, religious, neo-imperial) spills over from domestic politics to shape, and be shaped by, foreign policy. A former Visiting Research Fellow at Bilkent University in Ankara, she specializes in the study of Turkey's politics and society. Using data gathered from a wide array of popular culture and social media sources as well as interviews, surveys, participant observation, and archival documents, her first book will focus an "inside out" theory of identity contestation to account for how the contours of debates over national identity change over time, and the conditions under which these debates spill over into foreign policy. Her research appears in the *European Journal of International Relations*, *The Washington Review of Turkish and Eurasian Affairs*, and *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, as well as in op-ed pieces for *Foreign Policy*, *The Washington Post* (Monkey Cage blog), and *Hürriyet Daily News*.

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# **Georgia in His Mind: A Cognitive Explanation for George W. Bush's Decision-Making in the 2008 August War**

## **Introduction**

George W. Bush's overt and unwavering support of the Republic of Georgia in the run-up to and throughout the former Soviet state's August 2008 war with Russia has been called "failed US foreign policy"<sup>1</sup> and "Bush's Big Nyet" from voices spanning the political spectrum.<sup>2</sup> Commentators noted that Bush's "clumsy attempt" to expand US influence in the Caucasus had been "checkmated" by Putin.<sup>3</sup> Despite clear evidence that Georgian president Mikheil Saakashvili was demonstrating aggression and hostility in his speech directed at Russia and was becoming increasingly authoritarian and erratic in his conduct of domestic politics, what can explain Bush's staunch and continued support? Jörg Himmelreich, a member of an EU fact-finding commission tasked with assessing both Georgian and Russian behavior during the conflict states that "only a detailed assessment of President George W. Bush's Georgia policy and its failures can fully explain the outbreak of the war."<sup>4</sup> While such a detailed assessment is outside the scope of this research given the current availability of publicly accessible information, this paper argues that substantial empirical evidence suggests a cognitive approach provides the most complete and convincing explanation for why Bush maintained his support for Saakashvili. Rationalist approaches, for example, would assume Bayesian updating of beliefs based on incoming information and would thus predict a change Bush's perception of an increasingly reckless ally and potential Russia provocateur. A cognitive consistency approach, however, can explain why Bush, when presented with a significant piece of disconfirming evidence, does not update his beliefs but rather maintains his perception of Saakashvili as a liberal democratic leader and therefore does not withdraw his support.

In making this argument, the paper will first consider why the case of Bush's support for Georgia is an important one both for its empirical significance for international relations given the actors involved, and for the contribution the case can make to cognitive theories' understandings of misperception and the fundamental attribution error (FAE) among allies. The paper will then examine three potential alternative explanations for Bush's unwavering support, finding the expectations of each to lack empirical fit with the case. A beliefs-based approach centered on the need for cognitive consistency will then be outlined, illustrating the causal role of beliefs in shaping an individual leader's subjective perception of an "Other." The argument that follows asserts that Bush's tendency to perceive leaders as personal friends and his motivated desire for Georgia to succeed as a democracy promotion project led Bush to discount evidence of Saakashvili's aggressive speech abroad and his authoritarian behavior at home. Firstly the paper

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<sup>1</sup> "Crisis in Georgia Reveals Failed US Foreign Policy," on National Security Network, 27 August 2008, <http://www.nsnetwork.org/node/948>.

<sup>2</sup> Dan Froomkin, "Bush's Big Nyet," in *The Washington Post*, 27 August 2008, [http://busharchive.froomkin.com/BL2008082701604\\_pf.htm](http://busharchive.froomkin.com/BL2008082701604_pf.htm).

<sup>3</sup> Eric Margolis, "Putin Checkmates Bush in Eurasia," on Huffington Post, 19 August 2008, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/eric-margolis/putin-checkmates-bush-in\\_b\\_119672.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/eric-margolis/putin-checkmates-bush-in_b_119672.html).

<sup>4</sup> Jörg Himmelreich, "Missing from the Georgia Report," in *The New York Times*, 2 October 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/03/opinion/03iht-edhimmelreich.html>.

will demonstrate that ongoing, publicly available information signals contrary to a belief in Saakashvili as a liberal democratic leader were incrementally assimilated by Bush and therefore no belief updating occurred. Secondly, the paper will discuss two time-specific events in which Bush should recognize the authoritarian nature of Saakashvili's behavior and would therefore be expected to update his beliefs but does not do so. Neither after the violent November 2007 crackdown on opposition protestors which left over 500 Georgians injured, nor after Saakashvili's bombing of Tskhinvali in South Ossetia does Bush demonstrate belief updating. The paper will argue that this type of belief persistence represents a form of the fundamental attribution error not currently discussed in the literature, i.e. how allies attribute other allies' aggressive actions to external conditions as opposed to their disposition. Finally, the paper will conclude with reflections on avenues for further research on the FAE in terms of allies.

## Importance of Case and Selection of Method

External criticism of Bush's policy notwithstanding, Bush's sustained support of Georgia is an important case for study given its highly detrimental effect on the nature of US-Russia relations. Bush's calls for respect for Georgia's territorial integrity were flagrantly dismissed by Putin, demonstrating Bush's ineffectual capabilities in advocating for a close ally. Just two weeks after the termination of the conflict and, more importantly, the day after Bush asked Putin not to do so,<sup>5</sup> Putin recognized the regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and subsequently concludes military alliances with them.<sup>6</sup> This support for the two regions, widely considered a tit-for-tat response to the US' recognition of Kosovo earlier in the same year,<sup>7</sup> represents a formidable blow to Bush's influence on Russia's actions and on US-Russia post Cold-War relations in general. Further, Russia's refusal to accept any status-neutral proposal for a continuation of the OSCE Mission to Georgia following the August War led to the expiration of the Mission's mandate and the closing of its operations in Georgia – a clear failure for US objectives of security and democracy promotion. US Chargé d'Affaires to the OSCE Permanent Council Kyle Scott called this closing of the Mission a “sad fate” for what was one of the OSCE's most extensive and, given increased tensions in the region in addition to Saakashvili's increasing consolidation of political power, arguably most needed field presences.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Philip Pan and Jonathan Finer, “Russia Says Two Regions in Georgia are Independent,” in *Washington Post*, 26 August 2008, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/08/26/AR2008082600996.html>.

<sup>6</sup> “Georgia Report,” in *Nations in Transit*, Freedom House 2009, p. 212.

<sup>7</sup> The language is (perhaps unsurprisingly) STRATFOR's but the connection between the two is common assumption. George Friedman, “The Russo-Georgia War and the Balance of Power,” STRATFOR Global Intelligence, 12 August 2008, [http://www.stratfor.com/weekly/russo\\_georgian\\_war\\_and\\_balance\\_power](http://www.stratfor.com/weekly/russo_georgian_war_and_balance_power). Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov repeatedly foreshadowed the potential of Kosovo recognition affecting the status of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, stating in an April 2006 interview with Slovak newspaper *Pravda* that giving Kosovo independent status would “immediately be projected on other conflicts,” generally interpreted as referring to the two Georgian provinces as well as the Trans-Dniestr region of Moldova. Interview quoted in Igor Torbakov, “Russia Plays up Kosovo Precedent for Potential Application in the Caucasus,” for international NGO EurasiaNet.org, <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav041206a.shtml>.

<sup>8</sup> Russia was the only state objecting to a Finnish-proposed compromise in 2008 and a Greek-proposed compromise in May of 2009. The Mission ceased operations and withdrew personnel in June 2009. Transcript of “US Response to Report by Head of OSCE in Georgia” speech given by Kyle Scott to the OSCE Permanent Council in Vienna, 11 June 2009. <http://www.america.gov/st/texttrans-english/2009/June/20090611171604xjsnommis0.5504724.html&distid=ucs>.

Considering the overwhelming external criticism of Bush's policy, the negative consequences ensuing both for US-Russian relations in particular and for US influence in the region in general, and the potentially much more severe consequences that could have ensued had the conflict not swiftly been resolved, this paper asks: how is such a failure of foreign policy possible? Why did Bush continue verbally, financially, and militarily to support an increasingly authoritarian and erratic leader in the run-up to the war, and then maintain this support after Georgia's bombing of Tskhinvali that inflicted over 160 civilian casualties?<sup>9</sup> Further, why would Bush be willing to declare support for a small, remote state in a war with Russia, which with an army many times the size of the Georgian army has the clear potential for a swift and resounding victory? Indeed, such a resounding victory is precisely what transpired, leading not only to the economic, physical, and psychological destruction of a US ally, but to conditions which observers deemed "the West's worst crisis with Moscow since the end of the Cold War."<sup>10</sup> Some hints of the reason for this puzzling failure of US foreign policy may be identifiable in commentaries that criticize Bush's frequent reliance on "overpersonalized diplomacy."<sup>11</sup> Whether this anecdotal observation stands up to theoretical inquiry will be addressed below.

Bush's continued support of Saakashvili up to the outbreak of the August War and his reaffirmation of support for Georgia's territorial integrity present a hard case for cognitive explanations for at least two reasons. Firstly, as tensions publicly escalated between a close US ally and Russia, the prospect of a US confrontation with Russia became increasingly possible. Given the magnitude of these stakes, one would expect that presidential attention would be focused on gathering as much information as possible about the nature of the conflict and what strategies of de-escalation or disentanglement the US might be able to pursue. In short, if anything should be expected to escape from a "bottleneck of attention" it would be the looming potential for conflict with Russia, rendering a process of "satisficing" untenable.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, as one former Bush administration official phrased it, the administration "took its eye off the ball in Georgia,"<sup>13</sup> and thus was caught completely off-guard by the outbreak of conflict. Further, Deputy National Security Advisor Jim Jeffrey admitted publicly that the US was "not informed in advance" about Georgia's actions in the first White House press briefing to address the issue, three days after the war began.<sup>14</sup> As a *Wall Street Journal* editorial commented, the Bush administration's delayed response to the conflict demonstrated that it was "missing in action, to

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<sup>9</sup> "Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia," Council of the European Union, 30 September 2009, p. 21.

<sup>10</sup> Alex Rodriguez, "Kremlin Raises the Ante," in *The Los Angeles Tribune*, 27 August 2008, [http://archives.chicagotribune.com/2008/aug/27/news/chi-russia-georgia\\_rodriguezaug27](http://archives.chicagotribune.com/2008/aug/27/news/chi-russia-georgia_rodriguezaug27).

<sup>11</sup> Michael Abramowitz, "Crises Reveal Limits of Bush's Personal Diplomacy on World Stage," in *The Washington Post*, 27 August 2008, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/08/26/AR2008082603152.html>.

<sup>12</sup> Herbert Simon, "Human Nature in Politics: The Dialogue of Psychology with Political Science," in *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 79, No. 2 (June 1985), p. 302.

<sup>13</sup> Unnamed former White House official quoted in Toby Harnden, "Dispatch of US troops to Georgia will not save US from embarrassment," in *The Daily Telegraph*, 14 August 2008, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/northamerica/usa/2559735/Dispatch-of-troops-to-Georgia-will-not-save-US-from-embarrassment.html>.

<sup>14</sup> DNSA Ambassador Jim Jeffrey speaking at a White House Press conference 10 August 2008, <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2008/08/20080810-4.html>.

put it mildly.”<sup>15</sup> For an administration not to be cognizant of an ally’s military engagement with a major rival until after the fact suggests that substantial information was either left undiscovered or disregarded, in precisely the case in which the most information possible should be sought.

A second reason for why Bush’s support of Georgia represents a hard case for cognitive explanations is that Bush’s failure to update his beliefs about Saakashvili despite increasing signs of authoritarianism represents a form of type II error which, as Goldgeier and Tetlock note, should be exceedingly rare given that the costs of making such an error are so severe.<sup>16</sup> The standard type II error involves a mischaracterization of expansionary powers as status quo powers, and is rare due to individuals being quick to attribute any aggressive moves to an “Other”’s disposition as opposed to viewing such behavior as defensive or reactionary. Using this framework, Saakashvili’s aggression in launching a bombing campaign on civilian homes in Tskhinvali can be viewed as expansionist, or seeking to change the status quo, as opposed to purely defensively motivated. Bush, however, continued to view Saakashvili’s actions in terms of reaction to a Russian threat and phrased his public reactions condemning Russia accordingly. Such misperception on Bush’s part, this paper will suggest, can usefully be considered by applying insights of attribution theory, but by expanding the theory’s conceptualization of self to include allies, thus providing increased explanatory power and contributing to the development of cognitive theorizing about decision-making. An elaboration of this idea and its potential for future theorizing is presented at the end of this paper.

### **Alternative Explanations**

Before presenting an analytical framework that examines the causal role of beliefs in shaping perceptions of the “Other,” to maintain cognitive consistency, this section of the paper will consider three potential alternative explanations for Bush’s decision to stand by Saakashvili both after the November 2007 crackdown and after the bombing of Tskhinvali. Firstly, one could argue that Bush’s unwavering support of Georgia was offered in order to placate a significant military ally. After the US and the UK, Georgia is the third largest contributor of troops to the war in Iraq. Before the outbreak of war with Russia, the presence of 2000 Georgian troops in Iraq would provide Bush with a strategic incentive for maintaining military commitment in Iraq and thus supporting Georgia in the war with Russia. However, several days into the fighting Bush announced that Georgian troops would be flown back to Georgia to assist in the war effort at home. Using US military aircraft, nearly half of the Georgian troops deployed in Iraq were returned and sent to South Ossetia.<sup>17</sup> With the Georgian army routed (predictably, as discussed below) by the Russians, Georgian troops have not returned to support the Iraq effort.

A second possible explanation for Bush’s unwavering support for Georgia could be that he was unwilling to pay the audience costs of withdrawing that support. As Fearon argues, for example, those states that are the most sensitive to audience costs are the least likely to back

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<sup>15</sup> “Bush and Georgia,” in *The Wall Street Journal*, 13 August 2008, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB121858625630435059.html>.

<sup>16</sup> J. M. Goldgeier and P. E. Tetlock, “Psychology and International Relations Theory,” in *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 4 (2001), p. 73.

<sup>17</sup> “US Military Aircraft Bring 800 Georgian Troops Home from Iraq,” in *RIA Novosti*, 11 August 2008, reported on Global Security: <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/news/2008/08/mil-080811-rianovosti07.htm>.



down when disputes become contests.<sup>18</sup> The corollary of this notion would be that those states that are the *least* sensitive to audience costs are the *most* likely to back down. Bush in 2008, as an outgoing president, was arguably insensitive to audience costs and would therefore be expected to back down from supporting an ally when the ally enters a war with a major rival. This however, was empirically not the case, as Bush stood firm. An additional constraint at the domestic level could feasibly be a public's desire for the US to defend a friendly democracy, as Georgia was portrayed to the American people in Bush's public statements and subsequent radio address.<sup>19</sup> However, given the public's weariness with democracy promotion efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as the average American's likely unfamiliarity with a small country in the Caucasus, domestic support for Georgia would be unlikely to pull any causal weight here.

A third alternative rationalist explanation might be that one would expect the US to provide protection of an ally with significant oil access, specifically with an oil pipeline that bypasses Russia as does the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline. However, according to a rationalist perspective, Bush would have seen Saakashvili's imminent defeat and thus would have had no reason potentially to entangle itself in a conflict in support of its ally. With a Russian army many times the size of the Georgian army, there was no conceivable way that Georgia could prevail in the conflict,<sup>20</sup> especially given the paucity of troops at home due to the support of the Iraq War effort previously noted. Supporting Georgia thus only serves to weaken perceptions of US influence in international relations, increase tensions with the power who has the most control over oil and gas resources in the region, and potentially drawn the US into the conflict. The overwhelming discrepancy in troop levels between Russia and Georgia combined with Georgia's rash willingness to take on Russia on the battlefield leave Bush's staunch support of Georgia a puzzle for rationalist explanations. The following section therefore outlines a cognitive explanation of Bush's support, and tests it against rationalist expectations regarding updating.

### **Analytical Framework: Belief Stability and Misperception**

The causal role of beliefs in foreign policy decision-making has been approached from a variety of units and levels of analysis, from the impact of shared organizational culture on how threat perceptions are shaped in general<sup>21</sup> to the influence of overarching schemas and specific analogies on leaders' evaluations of and subsequent responses to particular events.<sup>22</sup> Common to all of these varied approaches is the assumption that beliefs shape the manner in which actors

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<sup>18</sup> James Fearon, "Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes," in *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 88, No. 3 (Sep. 1994), p. 577.

<sup>19</sup> "President's Radio Address," 15 August 2008, <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2008/08/20080815-5.html>.

<sup>20</sup> Despite the US military funding that was a subject of Washington's national security debate, the Georgian army remained dwarfed by the Russian. See: Jon E. Chickey, *The Russian-Georgian War: Political and Military Implications for US Policy*, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, February 2009, p. 5.

<sup>21</sup> See: Elizabeth Kier, "Culture and Military Doctrine: France between the Wars," in *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (Spring 1995), pp. 65-93. For a beliefs-based analysis of threat perception focused on individual leaders as opposed to group culture, see: Elizabeth Saunders, "Transformative Choices: Leaders and the Origins of Intervention Strategy," in *International Security*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (Fall 2009), pp. 119-161.

<sup>22</sup> See, respectively: Robert Axelrod, "Schema Theory: An Information Processing Model of Perception and Cognition," in *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 67, No. 4 (Dec, 1973), pp. 1248-1266 and Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).



interpret the world around them, i.e. that actors view a subjective as opposed to an objective reality. Because of a cognitive need for parsimony in order to make sense of a multitude of incoming signals in complex environment – a need to make cosmos out of chaos – individuals filter the information with which they are confronted. As Holsti notes, incoming information is filtered through the belief system in order to produce a meaningful guide for behavior.<sup>23</sup> Only when an individual can orient himself in his environment and in terms of those with whom he is confronted does action become possible.

Prevalent in the literature focusing on beliefs is the idea that beliefs, once formed, remain relatively stable due to the innate human need for cognitive consistency.<sup>24</sup> Stability of beliefs is crucial maintaining an understanding of the world around them. Individuals therefore tend to adhere to existing beliefs despite increasing levels of disconfirming evidence, a tendency which has been demonstrated in multiple laboratory experiments. One of the experiments Jervis references is that of the recognition threshold of participants for playing cards of incongruous suits and colors. Not only were individuals slower to identify incongruously matched cards (that a red spade was a four than if it was a black spade that was a four) but they were more likely not to recognize that cards were incongruously matched.<sup>25</sup> Such evidence contradicting existing beliefs is either explained away or assimilated into existing beliefs.

This inductive research has generated assumptions about individual decision-making and the failure to update beliefs through a failure to recognize incongruous, inconsistent, or disconfirming information. As Holsti, Jervis, and others have noted, such belief persistence regarding the nature of actor with whom one is interacting – Holsti's national image – can become “dysfunctional.” That is, erroneous images or misperceptions of an “Other” due to a failure to recognize incongruence of reality with beliefs can lead to undesirable decision-making outcomes. The following section will provide empirical evidence that such “dysfunctional” assessment of Saakashvili by Bush prevented him from recognizing the Georgian president's aggressive and erratic behavior. In a rough extension of Jervis' example of the incongruous cards, Bush's belief that Saakashvili was both a friend and a liberal democratic leader led him to perceive a card labeled as “authoritarian and friend” as “liberal and friend,” first assimilating and then explaining away authoritarian behavior.

### **Disconfirming Evidence and Bush's Belief Persistence: Georgia in His Mind**

With the causal role of beliefs in leading to misperceptions of an “Other” outlined above, this section first demonstrates that Bush perceived Saakashvili as both a friend and a liberal democratic leader. The section will argue that Bush, staking his reputation as a promoter of freedom and liberty on the successful consolidation of democracy in Georgia, is motivated to discount or assimilate information indicating the democracy is fact being rolled back in Georgia.

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<sup>23</sup> Ole Holsti, “The Belief System and National Images: A Case Study,” in *Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (1962), p. 245.

<sup>24</sup> See: Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), pp. 117-202.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 149-150.

Finally when confronted with two cases of undeniable evidence of authoritarianism, Bush forgives in the first instance and explains away in the second instance. These outcomes will be discussed in terms of the fundamental attribution error (FAE).

Bush's penchant for "overpersonalized diplomacy"<sup>26</sup> as critics have dubbed it is perhaps most evident in his relations with Mikheil Saakashvili. The leaders met three times during the four years of Saakashvili's presidency that Bush was in office, and each time the relations between the two were exceedingly cordial and casual. On Bush's trip to Tbilisi in May of 2005, for example, he appeared "a lot looser" than in visits to Germany and France, performing an impromptu dance to Georgian music and sitting down with his wife to a long, unscheduled long dinner with the Georgian First Couple.<sup>27</sup>

In addition to Bush's cultivation of a "warm personal relationship" with Saakashvili,<sup>28</sup> Bush placed significant emphasis on the cultivation of Georgian democracy throughout his presidency. On the same trip, Bush famously proclaimed Georgia a "beacon of liberty for the region and for the world," triumphing the Georgian president's leadership of the 2003 Rose Revolution that ousted Eduard Shevardnadze from power.<sup>29</sup> Speaking in front of a White House-created backdrop that proclaimed "Celebrating Freedom and Democracy," Bush used the opportunity to tie the rise of democracy in Georgia to the spread of democracy to the Middle East, telling the crowd that they are witnessing "freedom advancing from the Black Sea to the Caspian, and to the Persian Gulf and beyond."<sup>30</sup>

Two years later, after numerous reports warning that Georgia's democracy was eroding emerge and, crucially, after a violent suppression of opposition protesters, Bush maintained his staunch support of Saakashvili, calling him to congratulate him to express admiration on his "impressive" election victory.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, while Saakashvili exhibited numerous signs that he was deviating far from what one would expect from a beacon of liberty's leader long before Georgian bombs began falling on civilian homes in Tskhinvali, Bush maintained warmly personal relations with the leader, offered little public criticism of Saakashvili's actions, and ultimately supported Georgia's efforts in the August War. To provide a cognitive explanation for this puzzle that the alternative approaches discussed above fail to resolve, this section of the paper documents the increasingly authoritarian actions and public statements made by Saakashvili during his time as president up to and including the outbreak of war with Russia. After examining ongoing information that Bush could have sought out indicating that Saakashvili was not the liberal democratic leader him believed him to be, the paper will then turn to two key public events of the November 2007 crackdown and the August 2008 bombing of Tskhinvali should have caused

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<sup>26</sup> Abramowitz.

<sup>27</sup> Elisabeth Bumiller, "Stage in Georgia Lets Bush Show a Secret Talent," in *The New York Times*, 10 May 2005, p. 6.

<sup>28</sup> Ellen Barry, "Hailed in Georgia, Biden Hears Pleas for Protection," in *The New York Times*, 23 July 2009, p. 16. The article discusses Saakashvili's attempts to garner Vice-President Joe Biden's favor in terms of the cordial relationship Saakashvili enjoyed with Bush.

<sup>29</sup> Nick Paton Walsh, "Bush Toasts Georgia as a 'Beacon of Liberty,'" in *The Guardian*, 11 May 2005, p. 13.

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Elisabeth Bumiller, "Bush Encourages Georgia with a Warning to Russia," in *The New York Times*, 11 May 2005, p. 3

<sup>31</sup> "US President Congratulates Georgia's Saakashvili on Re-election," BBS Trans Caucasus Monitoring Unit, 14 January, 2008.

Bush to update his beliefs, according to rationalist predictions. By identifying these two clear pieces of disconfirming evidence that should contradict a belief in Saakashvili's liberalism, this section supports the claim that sufficient information was present to expect that a rational actor would update his beliefs regarding Saakashvili and would therefore recognize Saakashvili as a potential aggressor and liability as an ally. Rationalist expectations to the contrary, the section argues that Bush's failure to update his beliefs about Saakashvili's potential aggression left him caught without an immediate response to the outbreak of war.

In addition to specific points in time at which Saakashvili's aggressive and authoritarian behavior would be expected to cause Bush to update his beliefs according to rationalist assumptions, ongoing reporting from internal critics and international non-governmental organizations provided more than sufficient information that Saakashvili was no pacific, liberal democratic leader. At a public news briefing on January 12 2004, Saakashvili advised his Justice Minister "to use force when dealing with any attempt to stage prison riots, and to open fire, shoot to kill and destroy any criminal who attempts to cause turmoil. We will not spare bullets against these people."<sup>32</sup> Georgia's ombudsman for human rights, Sozar Subari, is and has been a long-time critic of the president,<sup>33</sup> and Freedom House scores measuring political rights and civil liberties have – after initial gains – fallen during his presidency as he reduced the decreased the legislative scope to reduce checks and balances on executive authority. By 2006, Saakashvili enjoyed "more formal power than Shevardnadze ever did," and Georgia had a "less independent media and fewer opposition voices" than before Saakashvili's ostensibly democratically-inspired Rose Revolution. November's crackdown also led to further reduced scores on civil liberties reported for the year of 2007, and the August War led Freedom House's *Nations in Transit* report to conclude that Georgia's actions in the conflict served as a "wake-up call for those who believed that the democratic decline ...would not have a detrimental effect of security and stability."<sup>34</sup>

Considering Bush's belief in Saakashvili as a friend and Bush's reputational investment in Georgia's success as a democracy, a cognitive consistency approach would expect that Bush disregard or incrementally assimilate all of the above pieces of information. Evidence that would otherwise indicate that Saakashvili was far from a liberal democratic leader and thus a risky ally with whom to align oneself especially in the face of Russian hostility toward Georgia would not generate critical reflection and updating of beliefs. This failure to update is precisely what the empirical evidence available seems to suggest. Examining two potential key turning points for Bush's beliefs below further supports this paper's claim that Bush's need for cognitive consistency influenced the way in which he perceived Saakashvili.

A caveat about supporting evidence is warranted here. Bush's highly maligned decision to continue support of Saakashvili in the run-up to the war and his delayed and limited support of Georgian actions during the war is clearly one with substantial ramifications for international

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<sup>32</sup> ITAR-TASS News Agency, 27 May 2009, <http://www.itar-tass.com/eng/level2.html?NewsID=13981293&PageNum=142>.

<sup>33</sup> Liz Fuller, "Ombudsman Slams 'Authoritarian Rule' in Georgia, Founds New Movement," commentary for Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, 01 October 2008, [http://www.rferl.org/content/Human\\_Rights\\_Ombudsman\\_Slams\\_Authoritarian\\_Rule/1293020.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/Human_Rights_Ombudsman_Slams_Authoritarian_Rule/1293020.html).

<sup>34</sup> "Georgia Report," in *Nations in Transit*, Freedom House 2009, p. 212.

relations and is thus an important and pressing subject of inquiry. However, the recentness of events entails that little to no access to the content of private meetings in which Bush defends the reasons for his decision is available. Lacking such documentation, unnamed White House officials speaking to the media currently provide the best procurable insight into what was said specifically about Saakashvili and how debates over possible responses to his actions were framed, but such insight is partial at best and suspect at worst. Without knowing the identity of the official who is providing the information we can discern neither the official's level of involvement with the issue nor his potential interest in disclosing the information he shares about the nature of the debate.<sup>35</sup>

Working with the information available, widespread reporting of internal leaks indicates that substantial internal dissent existed regarding the US's continued military support for Georgia in terms of arms-funding and Bush's strong public verbal affirmations of support. Previous debates consisted of Bush and Cheney arguing that Georgia, as a "role model of democracy" should be armed to defend itself against Russia, while Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, National Security Adviser Stephen Hadley, and the new undersecretary for political affairs countered that such armament by the US would risk Russia's ire.<sup>36</sup> Ideally, transcripts of the discussion that transpired between Bush and with his national security team directly before his declaration of support for Georgia on August 11<sup>th</sup> would reveal whether Bush believed he had been mistaken in trusting Saakashvili and arming Georgia, but content of Bush's adamant and repeated verbal declarations of support suggests this was not the case.

Given the lack of access to such deliberations but also the clear theoretical and empirical benefits to be reaped in understanding the causal mechanism at work in influencing Bush's policies towards Georgia, the best the researcher can do at this point is identify what is known that may indicate that a cognitive explanation would prove the most convincing, i.e. whether this might be a fruitful path of inquiry once such evidence became available, and what the ideal evidence for such an argument would look like. What is known is that there is substantial evidence for why Bush should have revoked or at least tempered his support for the increasingly authoritarian and aggressive Saakashvili both after the November 2007 crackdown and after the outbreak of the August War, and no apparent rationalist explanation for why he did not do so. Bush's continued support suggests some other mechanism may be at work, and that examining the causal role of beliefs in Bush's perception of the situation would prove useful in identifying how his subjective reality may have differed from those who offered dissent. Two major events that would be expected to shift Bush's beliefs regarding Saakashvili will now be examined, demonstrating that no such shift took place.

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<sup>35</sup> A bureaucratic politics approach, for example, might be more suitable if information released from a Department of Defense official or a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee indicates support for a different response than that which is advocated by the Department of State.

<sup>36</sup> Helene Cooper and Clifford Levy, "US Watched as Squabble Turned into a Showdown," in *The New York Times*, 17 August 2008, [http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/18/washington/18diplo.html?\\_r=4&adxnnl=1&coref=slogin&ref=world&adxnnlx=1219065006-3c1X1AQdpQ3jZMxiuyxbZA](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/18/washington/18diplo.html?_r=4&adxnnl=1&coref=slogin&ref=world&adxnnlx=1219065006-3c1X1AQdpQ3jZMxiuyxbZA).

## November 7, 2007: Violent Suppression of Opposition

If any event would be expected to lead Bush to reconsider his perception of Saakashvili as a liberal democratic leader, Saakashvili's response to opposition protests in November 2007 would seem to fit the bill. The violent suppression involved riot police chasing protestors with billy clubs and using rubber bullets, tear gas, and water cannons; the closure of independent media; and the declaration of a state of emergency.<sup>37</sup> Over 500 people were injured in the crackdown, although none fatally. Even in the immediate aftermath of these draconian measures, the US diplomatic response was light-handed at most. Relatively low-ranking diplomat Matthew Bryza, a deputy assistant secretary and old friend of Saakashvili's was dispatched to speak with him and encourage him, in particular, to reopen Georgia's main television opposition station. When interviewed, Bryza stated that "he applied no pressure or threats against Saakashvili's government but tried instead to talk friend to friend."<sup>38</sup> As a spokesperson for the Bush administration's position, Bryza's treatment of Saakashvili conveys no sign that Bush is concerned about Saakashvili's display of authoritarianism and whether the violent crackdown is indicative of future willingness to use force in other contexts. Shortly after their meeting, in fact, Saakashvili's highly hostile tone is still evident when quoted in an interview asserting that Georgia is "the fighting ground for a new world war... It's like rich Russians behaving very arrogantly in some European resort. That's the way they behave in international politics, because they believe that money brings power. There should be some concierge out there telling them to behave."<sup>39</sup> Saakashvili shows no signs of a preference for resolving conflicts peacefully as one might expect from a liberal democratic leader.<sup>40</sup>

Georgian opposition leaders, in addition to non-governmental organizations such as Human Rights Watch, made significant public effort to draw Bush's attention to the November crackdown during his meeting with Saakashvili on March 19, 2008. Christian Democrat leader Giorgi Targamadze appealed to US ambassador to Georgia John Tefft, requesting that Bush address the November events in his talks and that he call for a full independent investigation.<sup>41</sup> Bush's statement following his meeting with Saakashvili, however, is far from critical. Jovial in his tone, Bush joked about the two leaders' wives lunching together and his experience with Georgian dancing during his last trip to Tbilisi. Rather than distancing himself from the Georgian leader who, just several months before, instituted a state of emergency to justify a violent suppression of a protest movement in which over 500 people were injured, Bush offered praise

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<sup>37</sup> Clair Bigg and Daisy Sindelar, "Georgia: After Crackdown on Protests, President Calls Early Polls," commentary for Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, 08 November 2007, <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1079100.html>.

<sup>38</sup> Interview cited in Tara Bharampour, "As Georgia Moves to End Emergency, Visiting Envoy Pushes US Agenda," in *The Washington Post*, 16 November 2007, p. A25.

<sup>39</sup> Quoted in an interview with Shaun Walker, "Georgia's Leader Vows to Prevent Russia Reviving the Soviet Union," in *The Independent* (London), 20 May 2008, p. 18.

<sup>40</sup> Schumpeter's liberal pacifism would apply here. As Doyle notes, however, "peaceful restraint only seems to work in liberals' relations with other liberals." See: Michael Doyle, "Liberalism in World Politics," in *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 80, No. 4 (Dec. 1986), p. 1156.

<sup>41</sup> "Georgian party pushes for probe into November events at Bush-Saakashvili meeting," text of report on Georgian television station Rustavi-2 TV on 19 March, 2008.

of Saakashvili's democratic efforts, declaring "I admire the President. I admire what Georgia has gone through and what Georgia is doing."<sup>42</sup> Bush thus demonstrates no change of beliefs as would be expected, maintaining cognitive consistency despite vastly discrepant information.

### **August 7, 2008: Bombing of Tskhinvali**

A second point at which Bush would be expected to update his beliefs when confronted with incongruous information regarding Saakashvili is marked by the bombing campaign of civilian villages in Tskhinvali, South Ossetia that began on the night of August 7, 2008. Rather than distance himself and his administration from Saakashvili and what could be a conflict into which the US became entangled, Bush's first public response on August 9<sup>th</sup> calls for "an end to the Russian bombings" without reference to Georgian bombing and states that Georgian territorial sovereignty must be respected.<sup>43</sup> Later, on August 11<sup>th</sup>, Bush strengthens his criticism stating that "Russia has invaded a sovereign neighbor" and that Russia's behavior is "unacceptable in the 21<sup>st</sup> century."<sup>44</sup> Finally, on August 13<sup>th</sup>, Bush's public statement declares "unwavering support" for Georgia and announces a massive humanitarian relief campaign to be carried out by US military aircraft.<sup>45</sup> Given Bush's hesitation – what has been described by one former Bush administration official as sending "mixed signals to Georgia and then spen[ding] days hand-wringing before doing anything" – can we conclude that he finally updated his beliefs about Saakashvili? The three-day delay before a public statement was made could suggest that a reassessment of the situation was needed before a response could be made. One outcome of such a reevaluation could be that Bush, confronted by the indiscriminate bombing of South Ossetian civilians as part of Georgia's actions in the first phase of the war, updates his beliefs about Saakashvili and withdraws or at least tempers US support for Georgia. In cognitive terms, a change of beliefs would have occurred at this particular point in time if the information received about Saakashvili was so clearly in contrast with prior existing beliefs that it was "cognitively cheaper" for Bush to update his beliefs than to try to assimilate them with his previous beliefs.<sup>46</sup> However, empirical evidence does not point to any such belief change taking place. Rather, Bush frames the conflict in terms of Russian aggression with Georgia as reacting defensively.

This excuse of Georgian action and framing of the bombing of Tskhinvali suggests that a form of the fundamental attribution error may be doing some causal work here, although not in a manner typically treated in the literature.<sup>47</sup> The evidence indicates that Bush processes Saakashvili's behavior in the way one might be expected to interpret one's own behavior, i.e. by

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<sup>42</sup> "President Bush Meets with President Saakashvili," 19 March 2008, Office of the Press Secretary, <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2008/03/20080319-4.html>.

<sup>43</sup> "President Bush's Statement on Attacks in Georgia," 9 August 2008, <http://www.america.gov/st/texttrans-english/2008/August/20080811100714xjsnommis0.6263697.html>.

<sup>44</sup> Quoted in *The Washington Post*, 12 August 2008, p. A12.

<sup>45</sup> "President Bush Acts to Ensure Peace, Security, Aid in Georgia," 13 August 2008, <http://www.america.gov/st/texttrans-english/2008/August/20080814101116xjsnommis0.5554163.html>.

<sup>46</sup> Chaim Kaufmann, "Out of the Lab and into the Archives: A Method for Testing Psychological Explanations of Political Decision-Making," in *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 38, No. 4 (1994), p. 563.

<sup>47</sup> In IR, Mercer has written extensively on attribution error, but his focus is the relatively low utility of reputations, given that other actors attribute one's good behavior to one's situation as opposed to one's disposition that could be consistently relied upon over time. See: Jonathan Mercer, *Reputation and International Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996).

attributing Saakashvili's reaction not to an inherently aggressive or hostile nature but rather to the circumstances in which he found himself. Conceptually, the analytical use of FAE would necessitate expanding the category of "self" to include allies, or to define a salient "ingroup" to which ally membership may extend. The danger of such attribution are worthy of future exploration, as allies may rely too heavily on others by perceiving them as like themselves – the accentuation bias might also be explored here. Further, it is worth considering the conditions under which allies are likely to excuse other allies' behavior as situationally generated, and the point at which updating takes to place recognize that other allies are more aggressive or expansionist than previously believed.

## **Conclusions and further study**

A final related and also highly interesting question would be whether a cognitive explanation is also appropriate for Saakashvili's clear decision-making failure. That is, did Saakashvili misperceive Bush's public overtures of his support for Georgia's democracy, territorial integrity, and NATO bid as signals that the US would step in militarily to support Georgia in a conflict with Russia? His public statements clearly indicated a belief in the US' commitment to preserving Georgia intact as well as a belief in the personal friendship of Bush. In commenting after his March 19<sup>th</sup> 2008 meeting with Bush, Saakashvili thanks the president for what he terms "very unequivocal support we're getting from you" regarding Georgia's territorial integrity and the protection of its borders.<sup>48</sup> With public evidence suggesting such beliefs, would memoirs reveal that Saakashvili imputed US support and friendship to translate into military support if needed? Alternatively, would documentation of Saakashvili's private discussion of the issue provide evidence more suited to the assumptions of prospect theory, revealing that Saakashvili viewed himself in the domain of losses and was willing to engage in highly risky behavior in order to reassert Georgian territorial claims over South Ossetia and Abkhazia? Would interviews with Georgian cabinet officials corroborate the assumption that Saakashvili framed the repossession of the autonomous regions in these terms? As Mercer notes, discovering the "correct error" may prove extraordinarily challenging when so many errors are possible.<sup>49</sup> Once again, access to internal transcripts, memoirs, and interviews in order to triangulate among pieces of supporting information would provide the strongest evidence for such claims. Nevertheless, it is highly useful to attempt a first cut at such questions in order to ascertain whether such a search for such evidence might prove fruitful when such information becomes available. Especially when it is the case that rationalist approaches fail to provide convincing explanations, turning to psychological approaches that consider the subjective manner in which an individual perceives his decision-making environment can provide useful insight into ostensibly irrational foreign policy decisions.

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<sup>48</sup> "President Bush Meets with President Saakashvili," 19 March 2008, Office of the Press Secretary, <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2008/03/20080319-4.html>.

<sup>49</sup> Jonathan Mercer, "Rationality and Psychology in International Politics," in *International Organization*, Vol. 59, No. 1 (2005), p. 88